

Remarks by James J. Duderstadt
At the Inauguration of Dr. Maureen Hartford
As President of Meredith College

Dr. Hartford, distinguished guests, trustees, faculty, students, and friends.

It is both an honor and a pleasure to offer remarks at the inauguration of President Maureen Hartford, to wish her the best in her new leadership role, and to congratulate Meredith College in selecting an outstanding new president.

I must admit that in doing so I feel a bit like the father of the bride, regretting that Michigan lost in Dr. Hartford a remarkable vice-president, but also taking pride in knowing that Meredith College has gained great leadership. I should also note here that Michigan has lost twice, since Jay Hartford was one of our most valuable fund-raisers and development officers—yet another gain for Meredith.

I have given two daughters away on other occasions, but never before have I had to do so in the presence of such a distinguished guest as President William Friday. President Friday is a true legend in American higher education, known as one of the great university presidents of our times, as evidenced by the remarkable quality and diversity of higher education we see today in the State of North Carolina.

Yet, if Bill Friday was a visionary leader of higher education in the 20th Century, Meredith College has chosen in Maureen Hartford a president capable of providing great leadership for the 21st Century. Throughout her career, she has demonstrated not only a remarkable leadership ability, but as well a deep understanding of academic values and traditions, and perhaps most significantly, a deep respect—indeed, love—for the thousands of students who have benefited from her leadership.

This is important, for enthusiastic, visionary, and courageous leadership is needed during a time of great challenge and change characterizing higher education today. And it is particularly important that Meredith College benefit from such leadership because of the unique role that it plays as an outstanding liberal arts college for women.

We live in an age of knowledge in which educated people and their ideas have become the wealth of nations. Higher education has never been more important to our nation, and the value of a college education never higher.

Yet there are increasing concerns that higher education in American may be at some risk today. We are bombarded with news concerning the emergence of new competitors, ranging “e-commerce” to “edutainment” to “virtual universities” and “I-campuses”, Some believe that the intensifying market forces characterizing a knowledge-driven economy may sweep over our colleges and universities, pushing aside their academic values and traditions and replacing their civic purpose with the demands of the marketplace. Some doomsayers even suggest that the university, a social institution lasting a millennium, may soon disappear. Furthermore, to many students and parents, the purpose of a college education has become highly utilitarian, to earn the college degree necessary for a good job, for personal economic security and well-being.

Yet, ironically, surveys of leaders in business and government suggest they seek something quite different than practical knowledge or utilitarian skills from college graduates. They seek graduates who exhibit strong communication skills, a capacity for and commitment to lifetime learning, a tolerance for diversity, and an ability not simply to adapt but to drive to change—characteristics more associated with a liberal education than a professional program of study.

As difficult as it is to define and as challenging as it is to achieve, perhaps the elusive goal of liberal learning remains the best approach to prepare students for

a lifetime of learning and a world of change. The broader intellectual development of students, preparing them not simply for careers but for meaningful lives as contributing citizens, will remain a fundamental purpose of undergraduate education. After all, a college education should prepare one for life, and a career is only one of life's experiences.

Perhaps Ralph Waldo Emerson said it best in his famous Phi Beta Kappa lecture at Harvard in 1838:

“Colleges have their indispensable office, to teach elements. But they can only serve us when they aim not to drill but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame.”

And that, of course, is the most significant contribution of liberal arts colleges such as Meredith, to prepare women for meaningful roles, indeed, leadership roles, in our world.

And it is from this perspective that Meredith College has chosen its next president well. For in Maureen Hartford, you have chosen leadership capable of preserving and enhancing this vital role of Meredith College for today and for generations to come.

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